

Parker, Christopher S., and Matt A. Barreto. *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. xv, 361 pp. (\$29.95 cloth).

In post-war America, the Tea Party has been one of the most successful political movements. It has successfully organized chapters across all 50 states and elected sympathetic representatives at the local, state, and national levels of government. The Tea Party has become a major force in the Republican Party and one of President Obama's most strident critics. In *Change They Can't Believe In*, Parker and Barreto marshal social science theory and empirical data to explain the emergence and staying power of the Tea Party.

Their central theoretical proposition is that the Tea Party movement is not simply a conservative movement — it is a reactionary one. A conservative movement, in the classical sense, would advocate the maintenance of the status quo. In contrast, supporters of the Tea Party seek a radical shift to a time when the social hierarchy was unquestionably led by male whites, who were native-born, Christian, and heterosexual. The election of the nation's first Black president made clear that the dominance of social groups that many Tea Party adherents consider “real Americans” has slipped, fueling anxiety and urgency in their need to “take back their country.”

In making the case that the Tea Party is properly categorized as reactionary, Parker and Barreto revisit two previous reactionary movements in American history, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and the John Birch Society (JBS). Both of these movements were driven by the sense that outsiders were bent on subverting (white and Christian) American culture. For KKK, Blacks, Jews, Catholics, and immigrants stood in as the enemies of real Americans, while the JBS was far more concerned with the specter of communism. Similar to these movements, Parker and Barreto argue that Tea Party supporters share an ideology rooted in conspiratorial beliefs about their perceived enemies. In the current day instantiation of the radical right, Tea Party adherents in many ways combine the bugaboos of the KKK and JBS: minorities and the perceived socialist tendencies of the left. Drawing on content analysis of Tea Party websites and a survey experiment, they demonstrate that relative to mainstream conservatives, Tea Party supporters are more likely to concoct conspiracy theories that cast President Obama as the lynchpin in a socialist plot to undermine the American capitalist system and ultimately destroy the country.

Drawing on an array of originally collected survey data, Parker and Barreto devote the rest of the book to explaining the factors that underlie support for the Tea Party and its influence on political attitudes and behavior. Consistent with previous scholarship, they find that Tea Party supporters tend to be white, male, middle aged, evangelical, wealthy, and of average education. They also show that Tea Party supporters tend to score high on measures of racial resentment, social dominance orientation, and fear of Obama.

Beyond this descriptive analysis, Parker and Barreto propose that Tea Party support is a marker of a more deep-seated predisposition, and in support, they report numerous analyses in which Tea Party support predicts political attitudes beyond conservatism and related measures of conservative predispositions. In particular, they show that Tea Party supporters resolve value conflicts between freedom and egalitarianism in a distinctive way. Although Tea Party supporters are not uniformly committed to freedom as a principle — in fact, they prioritize security in many domains — they appear to be most wedded to freedom when it is framed as pursuing self-interest, rather than when it is defined as putting community before the self.

Perhaps more fundamentally, Tea Party supporters are much more likely than others, including non-Tea Party conservatives, to express strong negative attitudes towards out-groups, especially immigrants and homosexuals, both ascendant minority groups. Their intense dislike of Barack Obama seems to be driven, in part, by the fact that as President of the United States, he stands as a symbol of the nation and his election therefore symbolizes America's shifting demographic landscape. It affirms that the reactionary nightmare may have come true: the country in which they believe in has been taken from them. These beliefs create a sense of urgency among Tea Party supporters, who are especially politically active and, therefore, efficacious in their influence on congressional politics.

Parker and Barreto offer a compelling case for the thesis that fear of Obama lies at the center of Tea Party support. I see this as their most important contribution. Many of the analyses of polarization in American politics, particularly around health care reform and the debt ceiling, overlook the potential importance of Obama's race in the drive by some congressional Republicans to deny the president any legislative successes. In short, *Change They Can't Believe In* should be required reading for observers of American politics.

No book can accomplish everything and it would be unfair to expect that here. Consequently, I will sketch out what I see as the next steps in this area of research. First, Parker and Barreto advance the provocative thesis that Tea Party support is the marker of a predisposition that goes beyond the typical elements of conservatism. I believe that this claim needs more theoretical development. What omitted variable(s) does Tea Party support proxy? One possibility is that psychological motivations beyond the ones political psychologists have enumerated remain to be discovered. Another possibility is that Tea Party support is more or less a behavioral indicator of preference intensity.

Second, more attention should be given to investigating the role played by the 2008 collapse of the financial markets. Economic adversity has been the catalyst for many other populist movements in American politics, most notably in the late 19th century and more recently in the early 1990s. The Tea Party seems to share many common elements with populism, including nativism.

Finally, what about radical left movements? Scholarship tends to focus on the radical right, but a smaller radical left movement does exist in the United States (and certainly beyond). Do these movements create similar normative dilemmas for democracy? What explains why people are attracted to them? Does the politics of race privilege right radical movements in the American context?

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